EXOTIC

Whoever She Is In Apartment 4B~

A Hidden Identity Second Chances Romance

by

Thom Maddox

This short story is a work of fiction. All characters and events are purely fictitious.

Copyright 2026

By Thomas Maddox / GR8TV

Shared By Permission of the Author

The corridor smelled like fresh paint and industrial carpet cleaner, that particular chemical cocktail of a building trying to reinvent itself. I stood outside 4B with a six-pack of IPA sweating through the cardboard, wondering if my new neighbor would appreciate the gesture or find it desperate. The door across from mine had been empty for three months since Mrs. Patterson moved to assisted living in Tampa. Now someone had replaced her faded wreath with nothing at all, just a blank peephole staring back at me like a suspicious eye.

I knocked. Three raps, measured, not too eager.

The door opened six inches, caught by the chain. A slice of face appeared—dark hair pulled back, one brown eye visible, a cheekbone I couldn't quite place but knew I'd seen before. She looked at my shoes, then my knees, then finally my chest. Never my face.

"Hey," I said. "I'm Marcus. Four-A. Thought I'd introduce myself since we're going to be—"

"Thanks." The eye disappeared. The door closed.

I stood there with my sweating beer, listening to her footsteps retreat on hardwood. No chain rattle of her taking it off. No second look. Just the hum of her refrigerator

through the thin walls and the distant percussion of someone else's television down the hall.

Back in my apartment, I put five beers in the fridge and opened the sixth. The living room still wasn't finished—books in stacks against the wall, my grandmother's quilt folded over the couch arm because I couldn't figure out where else to put it. I'd moved in six months ago for the location, this converted warehouse in the Arts District with exposed brick and windows that actually opened. The previous tenant had left nail holes in patterns I couldn't decipher, constellations of someone else's memories.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the building's group chat, something I'd muted three weeks ago after endless arguments about recycling procedures. No mention of a new tenant in 4B. The building manager, a retired cop named Deluca, communicated exclusively through certified mail and threatening notes.

The beer went down cold and bitter. I kept thinking about that eye, the way it hadn't quite met mine. Not shyness—something else. Recognition without acknowledgment, like she'd already decided what I was before I spoke.

I worked from home Tuesdays, which meant I heard everything. The movers had come Monday while I was at the office, judging by the elevator traffic and the crushed cardboard in the recycling bin. Now it was ten in the morning and I could hear her through the wall, the particular rhythm of someone organizing, drawers opening and closing, something heavy dragged across floorboards. I tried not to listen, then tried to listen professionally, as if I were merely noting ambient noise rather than constructing a narrative of a stranger's life.

At noon, I went out for coffee. The building's front door had one of those heavy hydraulic closers that made every exit sound like a surrender. She was coming in as I was going out, arms loaded with grocery bags, and we performed that awkward door dance where neither person commits to a direction. She turned sideways, pressed against the jamb, and I squeezed past smelling cilantro and lime and the faint chemical trace of hair dye.

"Sorry," I said.

She said nothing. Her eyes stayed on the middle distance, somewhere around my collarbone.

In line at the café, I kept seeing her cheekbone from the side, the particular angle where it met her jaw. I'd spent four years in Chicago before this, a string of apartments and roommates and women whose names I sometimes forgot until I saw them again in unexpected places. She could be anyone. She could be no one. But my body remembered before my brain caught up, some primitive recognition system firing false positives.

The barista knew my order. I took my Americano to the window seat and watched the street, thinking about the way she'd held those grocery bags—wrists turned inward, knuckles white with tension, as if she expected someone to try to take them from her.

That night, I cooked pasta with the last of my good olive oil and listened to her television through the wall. Something with laugh tracks, the artificial punctuation of sitcoms. I ate standing at the counter, watching my own reflection in the dark window, trying to remember where I might have seen her before.

Wednesday I went to the office, a converted brewery space where I designed packaging for organic snack brands. The work was precise, technical, a relief from the messiness of human interaction. I spent six hours on a hemp protein bar wrapper, adjusting the kerning on ‘artisanal’ until it looked accidental rather than calculated.

My coworker Priya brought me a matcha latte without asking. "You look like you're solving a crime."

"New neighbor," I said. "Can't figure out where I know her from."

"Sleep with her?"

"Never spoke more than ten words."

Priya shrugged, already losing interest, her attention caught by something on her phone. "Probably saw her on a dating app. Everyone's on dating apps."

I hadn't been. Not for eight months, since things ended with Claire in a way that felt more like a statistical inevitability than a tragedy. We'd run out of reasons to keep trying, our conversations becoming increasingly efficient, negotiations rather than connections.

But Priya's suggestion lodged somewhere. That evening, I downloaded three apps and scrolled through faces I didn't recognize, searching for hers. Nothing. I deleted them before bed, feeling foolish and slightly relieved.

Thursday morning, I found her in the hallway again, this time checking her mailbox. She wore a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up, revealing forearms marked with faded ink I couldn't read from a distance. Her hair was down now, black and heavy, falling forward to hide her face as she sorted through envelopes.

"Bills," I said, approaching. "The eternal mail."

Her shoulders tightened. She didn't look up. "Yeah."

"I'm Marcus. We met—"

"I know." She turned, mail clutched to her chest, and walked back toward her door. I watched her fumble with her keys, the way her hands shook slightly before she got the door open and disappeared inside.

I stood in the hallway with my own mail—electric bill, coupon for a car wash, something addressed to the previous tenant that I'd stopped bothering to forward. The fluorescent light overhead flickered its death throes. I made a mental note to email Deluca, knowing he wouldn't respond.

***

That afternoon, I worked from home again. The building had good internet, better than the office, and I had a deadline for a kombucha rebrand that required concentration I couldn't find in the brewery's open floor plan. I set up at my kitchen table with coffee and noise-canceling headphones, but I kept taking them off to listen for her.

At three, I heard her door open and close. Footsteps toward the elevator. I counted to sixty, then followed, telling myself I needed air, needed movement, needed anything but the way her absence in the building felt like a presence, a negative space that pulled my attention.

The elevator was empty. I rode it down and walked out into October light, the particular quality of afternoon sun that made everything look slightly staged, too vivid to be real. She was half a block ahead, walking fast, and I let her go, turned the opposite direction toward the park where I sometimes ran.

I ran that evening, five miles of pavement and fallen leaves, my lungs burning in the cold air. When I came back, her lights were on, the glow visible through the transom window above her door. I showered and made eggs and tried to read a novel I'd been carrying around for months, its spine uncracked past page forty-seven.

The wall between us seemed thinner at night. I could hear her moving, the particular creak of floorboards in the corner nearest my bed. I lay awake wondering if she could hear me too, if she lay awake constructing theories about her neighbor who wouldn't stop trying to introduce himself.

***

Friday, I saw her properly. I was coming back from the corner store with milk and bread when she was leaving, and we collided in the doorway with enough force to make my paper bag tear. The milk carton hit the floor and split, white spreading across the tile in a shape like a country I couldn't name.

"Shit," she said, the first real word I'd heard from her, and she knelt immediately, gathering the broken carton, her hands getting wet with milk. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It's just—" I knelt too, our heads nearly touching, and for the first time she looked at me. Her eyes were brown, almost black in the dim hallway, with a small scar bisecting her left eyebrow. The recognition hit me like a physical thing, a door opening in memory I hadn't known was closed.

"Rachel," I said.

She flinched. Her hands stopped moving in the milk. "You don't—" She stood up fast, too fast, wiping her hands on her jeans. "You don't know me."

"From Chicago. The Green Mill, summer of—" I was standing now too, the ruined milk forgotten between us. "You were bartending. We talked for—"

"I don't bartend anymore." She was already moving toward the stairs, away from the elevator, away from me. "I don't do any of that anymore."

"Rachel, wait—"

But she was gone, feet pounding the stairwell, and I stood in the hallway with milk seeping into my shoes and the certainty that I hadn't imagined it. The Green Mill, that speakeasy with the hidden door, the night I'd gone with coworkers and stayed until last call. She'd been behind the bar with her hair shorter then, bleached at the ends, pouring gin with theatrical precision. We'd talked about jazz, about Coltrane's later recordings, about the way the city changed after midnight. She'd given me her number on a napkin I'd lost by morning, and I'd never gone back, never followed up, never thought of her again until now.

I cleaned the milk with paper towels from under my sink, the whole time thinking about the way she'd looked at me when I said her name. Not surprise. Fear.

***

The weekend passed in a haze of work and avoidance. I didn't hear her door open or close, didn't catch her in the hallway, began to wonder if she'd moved out already, if my recognition had been enough to drive her away. I researched her without meaning to, searched combinations of "Rachel Chicago bartender Green Mill" that led nowhere, that led everywhere, that led to women who weren't her with the wrong noses, the wrong scars.

Monday morning, I found a note under my door. Plain white paper, her handwriting slanted and cramped: *Don't tell anyone I'm here. Please. I'll explain.*

I read it three times. I held it up to the light looking for watermark, for code, for anything that would explain what I had stumbled into. Then I wrote on the back, in my own blocky print: *When?*

I slid it under her door at midnight, when I was certain she was home, when the light under her door had been steady for hours.

She answered Tuesday at dawn. I found the note when I went out for my run: *Tonight. 10. Don't knock if you see anyone in the hall.*

I spent the day in a fog of anticipation and dread. At the office, I designed labels for almond butter and couldn't remember any of my choices by afternoon. Priya asked if I was sick. I said I was fine. I said it too many times.

At 9:45, I stood in my kitchen with wine I'd bought specifically, wondering if this was a date or a confession or a threat. At 9:55, I opened my door and checked the hallway.

Empty.

I knocked on 4B with three soft raps, the same rhythm I'd used before, and this time she opened without the chain.

She'd changed the apartment already. The walls were bare, no nails, no evidence of anyone living there beyond the furniture that came with the place—a couch, a table, two chairs. She stood in the center of this emptiness wearing the same gray sweatshirt, her hair pulled back again, and she gestured me in with a hand that still shook slightly.

"Wine," I said, holding it out like a peace offering.

She didn't take it. "You can put it down. I don't drink anymore,"

I set it on the table, the only surface in the room. "Rachel—"

"Don't say my name. Not here." She moved to the window, looked out at the parking lot below. "I go by Elora now. Elora Voss. That's who lives here. I though it sounded exotic."

“Or erotic?”

She shook her head. “Exotic.”

"Okay." I stayed near the door, giving her space, trying to read the tension in her shoulders. "Elora, then. What happened? In Chicago?"

She laughed, a sound like breaking glass. "Nothing happened. That's the problem. Nothing happened, and then everything happened, and now I'm here with a name I bought from a man in Milwaukee and a job I got through a service that specializes in people who can't use their real names." She turned finally, and her eyes were wet but her voice was steady. "I saw you that first day and thought I was hallucinating. Thought the stress had finally broken something. But you're real, and you remember, and I need to know if you're going to tell anyone."

"I don't even know what I'd be telling."

"I'm in witness protection, Marcus. Or the civilian equivalent. I testified against someone, and they have people, and I spent six months looking over my shoulder before I let them move me here, put me in this building, this life." She said it flatly, as if describing a commute. "The less you know, the safer you are. The safer I am."

I thought of the way she'd held her grocery bags, wrists turned inward. The way she'd checked the hallway before letting me in. The emptiness of her apartment, nothing that couldn't be abandoned in minutes.

"Who?" I asked.

"Don't."

"Rachel—Elora—I'm not going to tell anyone. But I need to understand what I'm protecting."

She sat down on the couch, suddenly, as if her legs had given out. I sat across from her on the hard chair, the wine between us like an unopened promise.

"His name was David Kowalski. He ran protection for half the bars in Uptown, including the Mill. I didn't know, first six months I worked there. Thought he was just a regular, generous tipper, always asking about my music, my plans." She pulled her knees up, wrapped her arms around them. "Then I saw something. A delivery in the alley, the wrong kind of boxes. He saw me see it. Offered me five thousand to forget, ten thousand to remember selectively if anyone asked. I took the money because I needed it, because I was stupid, because I thought that was the end."

She paused, looked at the wall above my head.

"Six months later, the FBI came. They had video, audio, everything. Kowalski's operation was bigger than protection, way bigger, and they were building a case. My testimony about that night, about what I saw, it was small but it was corroboration. Chain of evidence. They made me an offer—testify, enter protection, or take my chances with Kowalski's associates when the indictment came down."

"And you chose—"

"I chose to live." She met my eyes finally, held them. "I've been Elora for four months. Before that, I was someone else in Denver. Before that, Phoenix. They keep moving me because I keep recognizing people, or they recognize me, or I get paranoid and call the marshals and they decide it's easier to relocate than risk it." She laughed again, softer this time. "You're the first person who's actually known me. The real me. In almost two years."

I thought of the woman I'd talked to at the Green Mill, the easy confidence of her behind the bar, the way she'd quoted Coltrane's liner notes from memory. The Rachel who'd existed in that specific summer, in that specific light, before whatever came after.

"I won't tell anyone," I said. "But I don't understand why you're telling me. Why the wine, the explanation, why not just keep pretending we never met?"

She uncurled slightly, let her feet touch the floor. "Because you kept trying. Because you looked at me like I was a person, not a problem. Because—" She stopped, shook her head. "Because I'm so fucking lonely, Marcus. Because I haven't had a conversation with someone who knew my real name in six hundred days, and

I thought I could handle it, thought I'd built something solid, but seeing you cracked something open."

The wine sat between us, unsipped, unnecessary. I thought about loneliness, about the way I'd filled my own apartment with other people's furniture and still felt the echo. About the women I'd let become temporary, the connections I'd failed to maintain because maintenance required risk.

"I can be a neighbor," I said. "Someone who nods in the hallway, who doesn't ask questions. Or I can be—" I wasn't sure what I was offering. "Someone who knows. Who keeps your secrets without understanding them completely."

She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes tracking my face as if memorizing it. "You were kind," she said finally. "That night at the Mill. You listened to me talk about music for an hour and never tried to turn it into flirtation. I remembered that, after. When I was trying to remember if anyone had ever been kind without wanting something."

"I wanted something," I admitted. "I just didn't know how to ask for it. Then I lost your number, or thought I did, and by the time I found it, the moment felt passed."

"I gave it to you on a Tuesday. You called that Saturday."

"I did?"

"You left a message. I still have it, actually, transferred between phones, between identities. 'Hey, it's Marcus, from the jazz place. No pressure, but I'd like to hear what you think of the Alice Coltrane album. If you're free.'" She recited it without inflection, a memorized text. "I was already in the program by then. Couldn't call back. Couldn't explain."

The hallway outside creaked, someone's footsteps passing, and we both froze, listening, until they faded toward the elevator. She let out a breath I hadn't realized she'd been holding. A person has to breathe.

"So what now?" I asked.

"Now you go back to your apartment, and I pretend this didn't happen, and we figure out if you're going to be a danger to my safety or—" She stopped, shook her head. "Or something else. I don't know. I haven't planned past this conversation."

"I could stay. Help you finish unpacking, if you have anything to unpack. Be visible, if that helps. A neighbor who visits, who borrows things, who exists in your life in ways that don't require explanation."

She looked at the empty walls, the bare table, the life she'd constructed from absence. "I have a plant," she said. "In the bedroom. Someone gave it to me in Denver, said I needed something alive. I've kept it alive through three moves, three names. That's the extent of my possessions that matter."

"Then I'll bring you a second plant. Something that needs watering, that creates obligation. That's how neighbors work, isn't it? Manufactured reasons to check on each other?"

She almost smiled. The scar on her eyebrow caught the light. "You're strange, Marcus. You were strange then too, I remember. Asking about my music instead of my phone number, waiting until I offered."

"I was scared. Am scared. The things I want feel dangerous to admit."

"What do you want?"

The question hung between us, heavier than that damn glass of wine, more potent than any alcohol. I thought of all the ways to answer, the careful constructions and deflections, the patterns that had kept me isolated and safe.

"To know you," I said. "The real you, whatever that means now. To be someone you don't have to lie to, even if you have to lie to everyone else."

She stood up, crossed to the window again, her back to me. "That's not possible. The real me doesn't exist anymore. She's evidence, she's testimony, she's a file in a government database. Elora Voss is the only person I can be, and she's—" She pressed her hand to the glass. "She's so thin, Marcus. There's nothing to her yet. I haven't had time to build anything solid. She’s barely exotic and definitely not erotic."

"Then I'll know her. Elora. Whoever you are now."

She turned, and her face had changed, some wall lowering or rising, I couldn't tell. "You don't know what you're offering. The checking, the paranoia, the way every stranger becomes a threat. I've had relationships in the program, if you can call them that. Men who thought they could handle it until they couldn't. Until my fear became their burden, and their resentment became my confirmation that everyone leaves eventually."

"I've had relationships end too. For smaller reasons."

"Not like this."

"Not like this," I agreed. "But I'm not offering a relationship. I'm offering—" I gestured at the space between us, the wine, the late hour, the strange gravity that had pulled us together across years and identities. "Whatever this is. Neighbors who know each other. Friends, maybe, if that word still means anything. Someone to notice if you disappear."

"You can't call the police if I disappear. You can't ask questions. You'll just have to wonder, like everyone else who's known me, where I went and whether I'm still alive."

"I can live with wondering."

She crossed the room then, stood close enough that I could smell her shampoo, something herbal and sharp, could see the individual hairs escaping her ponytail, the small crease between her eyebrows that deepened when she was thinking hard.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would you choose this? You could walk away, forget you saw me, live your normal life with your normal risks."

I thought of my normal life, the kombucha labels and the runs in the park and the women whose names I forgot. The way I'd been disappearing into something comfortable, something that asked nothing of me.

"Because you remembered me," I said. "Because out of everyone you've met, everyone you've had to become, you kept my message. Because that means something, even if I don't know what yet."

She reached out, touched my hand where it rested on my knee, the briefest pressure, then withdrew. "I kept it because it was the last kind thing anyone said to me before everything changed. The last moment when I was still Rachel, still someone who could be called about music, still someone who existed in the world without protection."

"And now?"

"Now I'm someone who needs to ask you to leave." She stepped back, the distance returning between us. "Because this is too much, too fast, and I need to figure out if I can trust you or if I need to call my handler and request another move, another name, another city where I start over with nothing."

I stood up, understanding the boundary she'd drawn, respecting it even as I wanted to cross it. "I'll go. But I'm leaving the wine. Well, the rest of the bottle, anyways. And tomorrow, I'm going to knock on your door with coffee, and you're going to decide whether to open it or not. And the next day, and the day after. Not because I'm demanding anything, but because now that I know you're here, I can't pretend you're not."

"That's not fair," she said. "To either of us."

"Nothing about this is fair. But it's real, which is more than I can say for most of my interactions lately."

I moved toward the door, paused with my hand on the knob. "Elora. Rachel. Whoever you are tonight. Thank you for telling me. For trusting me with even this much."

She didn't respond. I let myself out, closed the door softly behind me, stood in the hallway with my back to her blank peephole and listened for the chain sliding into place. It didn't come. I walked to my own door, unlocked it, went inside without looking back.

My apartment felt different now, charged with her proximity, with the knowledge of what existed across the corridor. I sat on my grandmother's quilt and thought about

the Green Mill, tried to remember details I'd lost—the color of her shirt, the song playing when we talked, whether I'd wanted to kiss her and been too afraid. The memory was fragmented, incomplete, but the feeling remained: just possibility, interrupted.

At 2 AM, I heard her door open and close. Footsteps in the hallway, pause outside my door, then moving on. The elevator dinged. I lay awake until dawn, wondering if she'd left for good, if my knowing had been enough to push her out.

But in the morning, her door was closed, her mailbox empty, the ordinary signs of someone continuing. I made two cups of coffee in my small kitchen, poured them into travel mugs I'd never used, and knocked on her door at 8:15.

She opened without the chain. She wore the same sweatshirt, different jeans, and her eyes were red-rimmed, sleepless. She looked at the coffee, then at me, then took the mug I extended without speaking.

"There's a park three blocks east," I said. "Bench near the fountain. I'll be there at noon, reading a book. You don't have to come. But if you do, we can talk about something else. Music, maybe. Or plants. Normal things."

"Nothing's normal," she said. "Not for me. Not anymore."

"Then we'll talk about abnormal things. The weather of other cities. The furniture of previous apartments. The way memory changes when you can't verify it against anyone else's."

She almost smiled, the same almost as before, and I saw Rachel in it, the woman she'd been, the woman she still contained. "You're strange," she said again.

"I've been told."

I left her with the coffee, went back to my apartment, and spent the morning trying to work on the kombucha labels, failing, starting over, failing again. At 11:30, I walked to the park with a novel I'd been pretending to read for months, found the bench near the fountain, and sat in the October cold with my hands in my pockets and my eyes on the path from the street.

She came at 12:17, wearing sunglasses and a hat I'd never seen, her posture different, looser, as if Elora Voss moved through the world with more confidence than Rachel ever had. She sat beside me on the bench, not touching, and looked at the fountain where no water ran, the basin filled with fallen leaves.

"I shouldn't be here," she said.

"But you are."

"But I am." She turned her head, and I could feel her looking at me through the dark lenses. "Tell me something true, Marcus. Something you haven't told anyone."

I thought of my small truths, the disappointments and fears I shared easily, and found them insufficient. "I'm afraid of becoming my father," I said. "Not his violence—he wasn't violent. His absence. The way he could be in a room and never really present, never risked enough to be known. I'm thirty-two and I'm already practicing his disappearances, his retreats into work and routine."

She was quiet for a moment. Then: "My father died when I was nineteen. Car accident, ordinary tragedy. I used to think that was the worst thing that would happen to me, that I'd already experienced the maximum loss, and everything after would be manageable by comparison." She laughed, soft, private. "I was wrong. There are so many ways to lose yourself, Marcus. Death is just the most permanent."

The sun moved behind clouds, and the park darkened, and we sat in the gray light with our separate griefs, our separate fears of dissolution. I wanted to touch her hand, to anchor us in something physical, but I didn't know which name to call her, which identity required which kind of care.

"Elora," I said, trying it out, feeling the strangeness of the sound. "What do you want? Not what you need, not what's safe. What do you actually want?"

She removed her sunglasses, folded them carefully, and looked at me with eyes that held both Rachel and whoever she'd become, the accumulation of losses and adaptations. "I want to be touched," she said. "Not sexually, not yet, though that too eventually. I want someone to know my body without needing my story first. To rest their hand on my shoulder and have it mean *I see you* instead of *what can you do for me*."

I reached out, slow, giving her time to withdraw, and rested my hand on her shoulder where the sweatshirt bunched slightly, where I could feel the tension of her muscles, the warmth of blood beneath fabric. She didn't flinch. She closed her eyes and breathed out, a sound like surrender, like relief.

"Elora," I said, and this time the name felt less strange, felt like something we were building together. "I'm going to keep showing up. You can tell me to stop, and I will. But until then, I'm going to be here, in this park, in that hallway, in whatever way you need me to be."

She opened her eyes, and they were wet again, but her voice was steady. "And if I need you to be nothing? To go back to being strangers who nod in passing?"

"Then I'll do that. But I'll know what I know. That won't change."

She stood up, stepped away from my touch, and I thought for a moment that I'd lost her, that the need for distance had overcome whatever was drawing her close. But she turned back, extended her hand, and when I took it, she pulled me up from the bench with surprising strength.

"Walk with me," she said. "Not here. Somewhere I haven't been yet, where no one knows either of us. Make up a story about who we are, why we're together. I'll pretend to believe it."

We walked out of the park, away from the building, into streets I didn't know well where the shops were closing for lunch and the traffic lights changed without pedestrians to trigger them. She held my hand loosely, ready to release it, and I held hers with the same caution, the same awareness of fragility.

"You're a photographer," I said, beginning the fiction. "Documentary work, long-term projects. I'm a writer, between assignments, researching something I haven't defined yet. We met at a conference in Portland, kept in touch, decided to explore this city together before you leave for your next project."

"Where am I going?"

"Mongolia. Something about nomadic traditions in the face of climate change. You showed me your grant proposal, the photographs you'd already gathered. I couldn't stop looking at your hands in the images, how they held the camera like it was part of your body."

She squeezed my hand slightly, acknowledgment or encouragement. "And what are you writing?"

"Still figuring that out. Maybe about people who disappear and reappear, who become necessary to each other without knowing why. Maybe just about this walk, this afternoon, this version of us that exists only here."

We turned onto a street of Victorian houses, their porches empty, their windows curtained against the day. She stopped in front of one with blue trim, a swing on the porch that moved slightly in a breeze I couldn't feel.

"In this story," she said, "do we kiss?"

"In this story, we do whatever you want. It's your grant, your timeline. I'm just along for the research."

She looked at me, and I saw the calculation in it, the weighing of risk against need, of safety against the particular loneliness of being unknown. Then she stepped closer, close enough that I could smell the coffee on her breath, the herbal shampoo, the faint trace of something medicinal underneath, stress or sleeplessness or the chemical residue of too many transitions.

"Kiss me," she said. "As Marcus. As whoever you are when you're not performing kindness."

I didn't perform. I reached up, touched her face where the scar bisected her eyebrow, traced it with my thumb as I leaned in. Her lips were chapped, slightly parted, and when we met, it was with the hesitation of people who had forgotten how, or who had learned too many ways to be careful.

It lasted seconds, maybe longer. When we separated, she kept her eyes closed, her forehead against my shoulder, and I held her there in the empty street, in the fiction we'd created, feeling the real weight of her, the real warmth, the real fear that vibrated through her frame.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For being the same person. In both stories. The real one and the made-up one."

We walked back eventually, separately, maintaining distance as we approached the building. She went up first, and I waited ten minutes before following, finding her note under my door: *Tomorrow. Coffee. Your apartment. I'll bring the plant.*

I slept that night without dreaming, or without remembering dreams, and woke to gray light and the sound of her moving through the wall, preparing, hesitating, deciding. When I opened my door at 9 AM, she was already there, a small succulent in a ceramic pot in her hands, her eyes meeting mine without flinching.

"Elora Voss," she said, introducing herself formally, as if we hadn't kissed, as if we hadn't confessed.

"Marcus Devereaux," I replied, stepping aside to let her in. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

The End